

Shadowplay by Nokomis

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Summary:

Eleven knows the cost of victory. She breathes it in with every toxic breath.

Shadowplay

Author's Note:

- For [lielabell](#).

This is for the lovely Lielabell, who wanted something involving Eleven. Thank you to Rainpuddle for looking over this! All mistakes are mine.

The waffle is going soft around the edges where condensation clings to the plastic wrap and the center crunches under her teeth like brittle bones. She eats it in several quick bites while resting on her heels beneath a tree with roots growing sideways.

The roots creep outwards, slowly reaching towards her as if they were going to cling to her ankles and try to drag her deep into the soil. She stands, drops the plastic wrap on the ground, sacrificing that small piece of the Rightside Up to the hungry tree, and hurries back to the dark winding path that leads to the town's dark reflection.

The box exists in both worlds when she needs it to, and as she carelessly wipes the blood away from her nose with her gore-splattered sleeve, she feels it flicker away, anchored only in the bright harmless forests.

Sometimes she thinks she could attempt to flicker into the Rightside Up herself, if she just had enough blood coursing through her veins, if she could just remember what it felt like to be warm and content, but she thinks she would exist there only as a ghost if she did, and she won't reduce herself to that. She won't be a muted thing in a world of color and light.

The path leads her to the crumbling, decaying hull of Mike's house. There is something growing out of the front door, something angry and vengeful, so she always cuts through the side yard (grass burnt black, though she's never seen fire here) and slides in through the broken basement door.

There are dark grey things growing out of the walls and the floor sometimes seems to pulse, but sometimes she can hear the echoes of voices: a bright burst of laughter from Dustin, a good-natured groan of frustration from Lucas, or excited chatter from Mike. She thinks they're in the basement, inches away, but she just can't... she can't reach through, not while she's anchorless.

She curls up under the table, in the space she cleared out there, and just listens to the echoes of happiness, and sometimes, she dreams:

The most beautiful color she's ever seen is the soft pink of Mike's sister's dress. She's never worn anything like it; experiments don't need to be pretty. Experiments need only to be useful.

But Mike and Lucas and Dustin give her pretty things, and yet they still need her. They need her help to find their friend, and to save their lives, and to just *exist*, to be their friend.

They even call her El, instead of her designation-number, and Eleven thinks this is how real people feel, this soft glowing feeling in her chest.

The pink of the dress envelops her, and she's feels light as the sun, as if the darkness will never touch her again.

She opens her eyes, and the world is no longer a wasteland. She's sitting under the table, the one she lived under when she was happy, and her blanket fort is gone, but in its absence she can see the room clearly.

The boys are sitting around a table, a clutter of dice and papers and tiny painted figures arranged with infinite care between them. Mike is reading from behind a folder; there is a sheet of crinkled lined paper ripped from a notebook taped to the outside, and Eleven is shocked to realize there's a drawing of her on it. Her dress is pink and her eyes are too soft and she's got a strange expression on her face.... A smile. Someone has drawn her with a smile and a dress and her shorn hair, and it's like she's still part of the group.

Mike starts to yell and wave his hands, and the other boys laugh and cheer, and the small one, the one who she only recognizes by voice,

rolls the die.

It bounces across the table and lands on twenty, to the delight and amazement of Lucas and Dustin. Eleven absently rubs the back of her hand against her nose as Will smiles, hollow but genuine.

The roll has won the battle; Will is the champion.

Eleven focuses on Will, because it doesn't hurt to watch him like it hurts when she sees the others. The pain is a good thing, she knows, because sacrifice without pain is nothing. But it doesn't alleviate the pain.

Will is virtually a stranger. She knows his mother and his brother and his best friends, she listened to his voice echoing through a radio as her head throbbed and that dark place in her reached out for *more*, but she does not know Will as a flesh-and-blood creature.

Maybe that's why he seems more like a shadow than a boy, like somehow the color is washed from him. He wears a black shirt that's faded into dark grey, and when she focuses in on him it's like she's back in the Upside Down, like the Rightside Up has never existed, and never will exist.

The darkness is within him, just as it is within her, and she wants to tell him to run, to leave Hawkins, to never come back. Go somewhere where the worlds don't brush against each other so closely, tearing and ripping and shredding the boundaries that are meant to keep things balanced.

She's crawled out from under her table without realizing, and Mike and Dustin and Lucas are packing away their painstakingly painted figures, while Will just sits there, staring at her with numb eyes.

She moves closer, entranced by actually seeing her friends for the first time since *before*. They've sobered quickly from the joy of winning the battle, and she realizes that they aren't as happy as she'd first supposed, sadness found in the slump of Dustin's shoulders, and the too-loud tone of Lucas's voice, and in the dark circles shadowing Mike's eyes.

You won, she wants to scream at them. We won, you won, celebrate. Cherish every moment you have in the sun.

But she doesn't; they couldn't hear her, and besides, Eleven knows the cost of victory. She breathes it in with every toxic breath.

Mike picks up a small figurine with pointed ears, and says suddenly, forcefully, "Fuck the Undying Lands."

Lucas's shoulders tighten, and he says nothing as he carefully pushes his chair under the table.

Dustin scowls. "I'm not having this argument again, jeez. No one went to the freaking Undying Lands. And anyway, they aren't a punishment, they're paradise."

"Is it really paradise if you have to leave your friends behind to go there?" Will's voice echoes strangely in her ears, as if she's hearing him in two places at once. "Besides, El isn't in the Undying Lands. El's in Mordor."

Uneasy silence. Eleven wonders what Mordor is.

Mike's hand rests on the drawing of her. "I saw something in the woods."

"No," Lucas says. "I miss her too, but no. We are not going back into damn Mirkwood."

Mike shakes his head. "It wasn't her, it was... Chief Hopper. He was leaving things there..."

"Things? Like, for El?" Dustin asks. His voice cracks on her name, and Eleven, despite everything, smiles. "Do you think... I mean. Is she really *there*?"

No one seemed willing to say the words 'Upside Down.'

Will's eyes catch hers, and she nods her head. She isn't sure if he can hear her, and she isn't sure what to say.

"We should leave things too," he says quietly, and the boys, easy as

that, are in agreement.

Eleven stands there, surrounded by friends, and for a moment it's like the light is back inside her, like she remembers how the sunshine felt on her institution-pale skin. Her dress is pink and the hem isn't muddy and the sleeves aren't stiff with drying blood, and she thinks if she flings her arms around them, if she reaches out, she might be able to touch them.

She slides her feet forward, afraid of making a sound, and her fingertips almost -- *almost* -- brush against Mike's

Then she blinks, and she's lying down under the table where she fell asleep, and her dress is stained and ruined, and the gnawing hunger is back in her belly, that twisting aching desire to be anywhere but where she is.

She crawls out slowly, casting cautious eyes around the room, because things creep around the edges here, insidious little monsters of her own making, and she's in more danger from them than anyone. But there's nothing there, just the echo of excited voices.

She blinks again, and Will is standing there, still in his faded, stretched shirt -- she thinks it might be his brother's, Will seems to be drowning in it -- and there's a thin stream of black slime leaking from his nose. It's like a dark reflection of her own nosebleeds, and she stands there facing him, aware of every toxic mouthful of air she breathes.

Will's hand flutters at his side in a wave, and she knows he can see her, that he's slipped somehow through the barrier, but she also knows in that deep, dark place of her that his body is still anchored in the Rightside Up.

"I'm here," she says, finally finding words. Her voice creaks like a rusted doorhinge.

"Can you open another door?" Will's voice is barely a whisper, and she hears the echo of sneakers pounding up the stairs. He's alone in the basement, but just barely.

She shakes her head. "I can't... There's no quiet places here," she says.

Will understands. "We'll find another door, then. Sometimes I can... Sometimes it seems like I could see one, if I was close."

She wants to tell him to stay away, that he's going to be dragged back into the Upside Down, that the Upside Down has already infected him, but she knows the words are useless. Will knows.

Then she remembers the Eggo, frozen and burnt and real in her belly, and she says, "Follow Mike to the woods."

Will nods, and when she blinks this time, he's gone, as if he'd never been there.